

Article



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Lessons from Mount Lu: China and cross-cultural understanding

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Abstract

Su Shi, one of China's greatest poets, has a simple but famous poem on viewing Mount Lu, presenting different images viewed from different perspectives. Reading this as an allegory of understanding China, this article examines the paradigmatic change of Sinology or China studies in the United States with regard to Paul Cohen's "China-centered" approach, presents a critique of the dichotomous view of China as the reverse image of the West, and argues for the synthesis of different perspectives without privileging either the insider's or the outsider's view, hence the necessity to integrate Sinology with Chinese native scholarship, the desirability of a pluralistic view in cross-cultural hermeneutics.

Keywords

Chinese native scholarship, cross-cultural understanding, paradigmatic change, Paul Cohen, Sinology

Mount Lu is a famous mountain in Jiangxi Province in southeast China, famous not just for its natural beauty but also for its rich historical associations. Throughout the centuries, many poets and writers have immortalized the mountain in numerous poems and literary prose, of which a short quatrain, "Written on the Wall of the Temple of West Woods," by one of China's greatest poets, Su Shi (1037–1101) in the 11th century, is perhaps the most memorable. The poem describes Mount Lu in four lines:

> Viewed horizontally a range; a cliff from the side;
>
> It differs as we move high or low, or far or nearby.

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We do not know the true face of Mount Lu,

Because we are all ourselves inside.

The particular appeal of this poem lies in its philosophical insight into the interaction between recognition and perspective, the changing views of an object as the hermeneutic horizon moves and changes, and the difficulty of knowing anything in its entirety and from within. "We do not know the true face of Mound Lu," says the poet, "[B]ecause we are all ourselves inside." The last two lines are so well known that they become part of the common parlance with the implication that the very interiority of the location makes it impossible for the knowing subject to have true knowledge, that the insider may have blind spots and epistemic limitations, while the outsider may presumably command a better view and have better knowledge at a critical or reflective distance. That has indeed been many readers' understanding of that famous poem.

If we take Mount Lu as a synecdoche for China as a whole, then, such a reading of the poem could be taken to imply an endorsement of Sinology or China studies that looks at China not from within but from the outside. The Sinologist as an outsider could then be seen as the one who understands China better than a native Chinese does, given the latter's necessary limitations and blind spots. Many Sinologists, particularly those trained in social sciences in the West, do think of China as an object of study, as something to be analyzed by employing Western social scientific theories and methodologies. In some cases, there is what I would call a "social science arrogance," which also smacks of an Orientalist bias, in the sense that a Western scholar would think of China and the Chinese only in terms of materials for a critical analysis made possible only in the West with precision and sophistication. Sinology or Western China studies lay claim to better understanding of China precisely because they are not native Chinese scholarship. They observe Mount Lu, so to speak, from the outside.

In American China studies, however, that attitude has been challenged and severely criticized. According to Paul Cohen, to look at China from a Western perspective is precisely the problem with Western Sinology in general and American Sinology in particular. He identifies three different American models in China studies. The first one, the "Western impact and Chinese response" paradigm, understands Chinese history from the 19th century to the early 20th, that is, from the Opium Wars in the 1840s to the 1911 Revolution and the establishment of the Republic of China, as a history determined by the impact from the West on China as a stagnant, weak, and dying empire. The second is the "modernization" approach that interprets modern Chinese history as a continuous but ineffective effort at modernization, which is understood as Westernization. Finally, there emerged in the 1960s the framework of "imperialism," namely, a framework in which progressive China scholars discussed how Western imperialism had influenced and impeded the unfolding of modern Chinese history. All three of these paradigms look at China from an outsider's perspective, in which whatever is considered important in the study of Chinese history is judged by a Western measurement at the cost of native experience and the internal route of development in modern Chinese history. Therefore, Cohen (1984) argues, "all three, in one way or another, introduce Western-centric distortions into our understanding of nineteenth- and twentieth-century China" (p. 5). Against such

Western-centric distortions of Chinese history, Cohen advocates a "China-centered" approach that puts emphasis on Chinese language materials and Chinese perspectives and tries to adopt a native's point of view empathetically. The new approach "begins with Chinese problems set in a Chinese context," says Cohen (1984: 5). No matter whether or how these problems may be related to the West, they are "*Chinese* problems, in the double sense that they are experienced in China by Chinese and that the measure of their historical importance is a Chinese, rather than a Western, measure" (Cohen, 1984: 154). As an American scholar himself, Cohen was courageous to present his critique of Western-centrism in American Sinology in the early 1980s; his book marks an important point of paradigmatic change in China studies, but it has also remained somewhat controversial.

The difficulty with Cohen's "China-centered" approach lies not just in the still strong sense of the theoretical superiority of Western social science models, which most Western scholars necessarily embrace, that is, a sense of superiority that may account for many Sinologists' resistance to, if not downright rejection of, Cohen's proposal. The difficulty lies rather in the theoretical dilemma of the "China-centered" approach itself. First, it is impossible for Western China scholars to become native Chinese and adopt a native point of view, even if they are willing to do so, and, second, the native point of view does not guarantee better understanding of historical events or the reality of any given period of history. Of course, Cohen (1984) realizes this, and what he asks Western China scholars to do is not "eliminating all ethnocentric distortion," but "reducing such distortion to the minimum" (p. 1). That is certainly reasonable, but the sheer enormity and complexity of China and its history make it very difficult to reach a level of understanding that can claim to have the true view of the matter or the "true face of Mount Lu." Even if one can imitate or emulate a native participant's experience and point of view, it is just a particular individual's experience and point of view, which may be very different from the totality of historical experience we call China or Chinese history as a whole. In the 19th century, developing an insight expressed first in Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, Wilhelm Dilthey once claimed that "the first condition of possibility of a science of history is that I myself am a historical being, that the person studying history is the person making history" (quoted in Gadamer, 1991: 222). Vico and Dilthey, however, have not solved the problem of how finite individual historical experience can become knowledge of a given period of history as a whole. H.G. Gadamer (1991) argues that

> positing homogeneity as its condition conceals the real epistemological problem of history. The question is how the individual's experience and the knowledge of it come to be historical experience … the important question remains how such infinite understanding is possible for finite human nature. (pp. 222, 232)

Whatever you see as Mount Lu is just a particular sight or part of it, and how that particular view can claim to be the true face of Mount Lu is the difficult epistemic question for all historical understanding. Su Shi seems to suggest that a "China-centered" view is unable to reach a complete view or comprehensive historical understanding because the insider's finite experience and knowledge are hardly transferable to a true understanding of Mount Lu as a whole.

The way Cohen solves that problem is by dividing China into small pieces of more or less manageable sizes, "horizontally" into regions, provinces, prefectures, counties, and cities, and "vertically" into various levels and social strata. By doing so, he makes the study of China more concretely as the study of regional and local histories on the one hand and popular and non-popular lower-level histories on the other. Once China studies is localized and cut up into small-size studies, however, as Cohen (1984) himself admits, the approach "is not *China*-centered at all, but region-centered, or province-centered or locality-centered" (p. 162). Not only that, but the theories and methodologies of Cohen's China-centered paradigm are not Chinese, either, as he "welcomes with enthusiasm the theories, methodologies, and techniques developed in disciplines other than history (mostly, but not exclusively, the social sciences) and strives to integrate these into historical analysis" (Cohen, 1984: 186–187). As all these social science theories and methodologies are developed in Western scholarship, the use of these would seriously undermine the "China-centered" approach that puts so much emphasis on native Chinese experience and native Chinese criteria in value-judgment. This constitutes a real challenge to any claim to a native-perspective vis-à-vis a "Western" perspective or an insider's view vis-à-vis an outsider's view. The insider, again as the poet Su Shi tells us, does not know "the true face of Mount Lu" simply because he is trapped in his own limited horizon or perspective.

Indeed, Cohen's "China-centered" paradigm has its problems, but its critique of Western-centrism is certainly valid and important, for the outsider may be equally limited in his external perspective that often lacks inside experience. Sinology or China studies in the West are by definition Western, and a Sinologist cannot but look at China from the outside. That is not a problem, but a problem arises when a Sinologist insists that only an outsider can have a better view of Mount Lu or that the inside and the outside are mutually exclusive and incommensurate. The former, that is, the conviction of the superiority of the outsider's view, is an assumption sometimes consciously, but often unconsciously, held by many Western scholars, while the latter, that is, the concept of the East–West dichotomy, is often explicitly expressed in Western discourses on China. Influential thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, for example, although they have no interest in Sinology or China studies as such, nevertheless use China as a symbol of a cultural "Other" fundamentally different from the European self. Foucault's (1973) most strange and unconceivable "*heterotopia*," manifested in a bizarre classification system of animals, an "exotic charm of another system of thought" allegedly found in a "Chinese encyclopaedia," offers a curious example (p. xv). Derrida's (1976) claim that the largely non-phonetic Chinese scripts embody the perfect "*différance*" and bear "the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism" offers another (p. 90). Such claims and assertions about China as the opposite of the West are telling signs of the intellectual climate of our times, and it is therefore not surprising to find some China scholars working to further these claims.

The French scholar François Jullien is probably the most vocal in asserting the fundamental differences between Chinese and Greek perspectives and values, and he understands Sinology as ultimately an effort to return to the European self through the experience of China as pure difference, for he maintains that "China presents a case study through which to contemplate Western thought from the outside" (Jullien, 2000: 9). For Jullien

and Marchaissse (2000), China represents an alternative to Europe, and he claims that "strictly speaking, *non-Europe* is China, and it cannot be anything else" (p. 39). In his numerous publications, Jullien often sets up two columns of concepts or categories, one Greek and the other Chinese, perfectly opposite and contrastive to one another. Those contrastive columns, however, have more to do with Jullien's predilection for contraries than with Greek or Chinese thought and culture as such, for it is his contrastive argument that turns his image of China into the reverse of Greece. His systematically binaristic method makes it predictable that whatever he finds in China is the opposite of Greece, thus always a confirmation of fundamental cultural differences.

In setting up a binary between China and Europe, particularly ancient China and ancient Greece, Jullien follows a French intellectual genealogy, in which differences between the East and the West, particularly China and Greece, are often brought to a philosophical level of language and thinking. For example, under the influence of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's concept of the collective and distinct *mentalité*, Marcel Granet (1968) proposed the idea of a distinct Chinese *mentalité* or *la pensée chinoise*, which differs profoundly from that of the West. Likewise, in examining the failure of Christian mission in China, Jacques Gernet (1985) attributed that failure to fundamental differences between China and the West, "not only of different intellectual traditions but also of different mental categories and modes of thought" (p. 3). These arguments obviously anticipate Jullien's Chinese–Greek opposition. As Jonathan Spence (1998) remarks, to set up "mutually reinforcing images and perceptions" of an exotic China "seems to have been a particularly French genius" (p. 145). That is not quite true, however, because it is not just French scholars who put excessive emphasis on cultural differences between the East and the West. The American scholar Richard Nisbett (2003), for example, puts incredibly large numbers of people together as mutually incommensurate groups and argue that "members of different cultures differ in their 'metaphysics', or fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world," and that "the characteristic thought processes of different groups differ greatly" (pp. xvi–xvii). What he is talking about here are two huge groups, one "Asians" and the other "Westerners," who, according to Nisbett, differ fundamentally in thinking and in behavior. So in Western scholarship on China or the East, we may often find such an either/or opposition or East/West divide, which sets up a Western self against which the various aspects of China or Chinese culture are brought up as contrast or as a reverse mirror image. These are self-consciously outsiders' points of view, and in their discussions of Chinese language, literature, thought, and culture, these scholars almost totally ignore the insiders, that is, Chinese scholars and their works written in Chinese. This certainly runs counter to the spirit of the "China-centered" paradigm, which, as Cohen (2003) puts it, tries "to get inside China, to reconstruct Chinese history as far as possible as the Chinese themselves experienced it" (p. 1). The problem with such dichotomous claims is the "social science arrogance" I mentioned earlier, that is, Western claims and assertions that are put forward as though they are universal truths applicable to China or things Chinese. Instead of a humble acknowledgement that we "do not know the true face of Mount Lu," either from the inside or from the outside, such claims are often presented as scientific representations of the "true face of Mount Lu."

Given the predominant influence of the West in economic, political, and many other aspects of social life in our time, it is particularly important to be alert to the limitations

of universal claims to truth based on European or Western experience and history. A case in point is the debate of the very concept of "China" as a nation-state. In Western scholarship, the nation-state is understood as a modern concept, a political entity formulated during the Renaissance or early modernity. "The modern state is a sovereign state. Sovereignty is a concept that was invented in the modern world-system," says Immanuel Wallerstein (2004: 42). Obviously, the concept of a sovereign state is here formulated on the basis of European history, with no consideration of the other parts of the world, but because of the influence of the theory of world-system and the concept of nation-state, some have come to question whether China before the 17th century could have been a nation-state or just an "imagined community."

This has become an important issue in China, and a leading Chinese scholar, Ge Zhaoguang of Fudan University, has made a powerful argument against the anachronistic imposition of a modern European concept on ancient China and its very different history. "Different from Europe, China's political territory and cultural space spread out from the center towards the peripheries," says Ge Zhaoguang (2011):

> Even without mentioning the pre-Qin antiquity, at least from the time of the Qin and the Han dynasties, by "unifying the width of vehicle tracks, unifying the written scripts, and unifying moral codes," language and writing, moral principles and customs, and the political system began to gradually stabilize the nation within this space, and this is quite different from the European understanding of the nation as a new phenomenon in late human history. Therefore, the theory that separates traditional empires and modern states into two different eras does not fit in well with Chinese history, nor does it fit the Chinese consciousness of a nation or the history of the emergence of a nation. (p. 28)

Ge Zhaoguang (2011) puts his question straightforwardly:

> We may ask in return: does a historian need to consider the particularities of Chinese history that differ from European history? The general homogeneity of Chinese civilization, particularly of the Han nationality, the coincidence between the living space of the Han people and the space of the various dynasties, the continuity of the Han tradition and the allegiance to the Han political authorities—are all these simply "accidental" and "controversial"? Is China a nation-state set up gradually only in modern times (understood as Western modernity)? (p. 24)

With ample historical evidences and solid textual analysis, Ge Zhaoguang proposes to understand China not just internally but in relation to the larger context of East Asian history. At the same time, he has a strong sense of the specific stance a historian will necessarily take in a particular historical and cultural tradition, from which a Chinese historian may challenge the validity of mechanically applying Western concepts to non-Western histories and realities. After all, an outsider's view may also be limited by its own blind spots.

When we read the Su Shi poem on "Mount Lu" again, we may realize that the poem is perhaps a victim of the success of its own last two lines, so much so that people tend to read it as an endorsement of the outsider's point of view. It is true that the poet says: "We do not know the true face of Mount Lu/Because we are all ourselves inside." But it is important to note that the poet does *not* say that we would know "the true face of

Mount Lu" if we get outside. If we pay attention to the equally important two opening lines, then we may realize that the meaning of this poem is quite different from the conventional reading. In the very first line, Su Shi presents two very different views of Mount Lu as "a range" and "a cliff," which are equally valid as representations of Mount Lu, although viewed from different angles, "horizontally" or "from the side." The poet continues to say that Mount Lu "differs as we move high or low, or far or nearby," thus completely invalidates any particular view or particular representation as the only true one. Su Shi is far too subtle and perceptive a poet to endorse the simplistic claim to truth either by the insider or the outsider, and to read this poem as privileging the outsider's view is only to misread it. What the poet endorses is the plurality of views or the multi-dimensionality of Mount Lu as a compelling and complex presence that can be viewed from diverse perspectives. To put it differently, neither insiders nor outsiders have a privileged point of view, and, by extending this insight to our discussion of China studies, we may realize that no particular point of view has privileged access to knowledge in the understanding of China, its history, society, culture, and tradition. At best, insiders and outsiders are all limited in their respective horizons and finite determinacy, and at worst, the insider's blind spots are matched only by the outsider's ignorance and lack of sensitivity.

In an insightful 1972 essay, the famous sociologist Robert Merton had already exposed the limitations of both insiders and outsiders who claim to have a *monopolistic* or *privileged* access to certain kinds of knowledge. "In structural terms," says Merton (1973), "we are all, of course, both Insiders and Outsiders, members of some groups and, sometimes derivatively, not of others; occupants of certain statuses which thereby exclude us from occupying other cognate statuses" (p. 113). This is obviously true with any individual or social group, but more importantly, we should realize "the crucial fact of social structure that individuals have not a single status but a status set: a complement of variously interrelated statuses which interact to affect both their behavior and perspectives" (Merton, 1973: 113). More recently, Amartya Sen (2006) also puts emphasis on the same crucial fact that it is the illusion of singular and exclusive identities that breeds conflict and war in our world. "Violence is fomented," he says, "by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities on gullible people, championed by proficient artisans of terror" (Sen, 2006: 2). In making sense of identities, we must realize that we always have plural affiliations and multiple identities: "We are all individually involved in identities of various kinds in disparate contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our background, or associations, or social activities" (Sen, 2006: 23). The lessons from Mount Lu do not come to form a simple endorsement of any particular point of view, either the insider's or the outsider's. With such an insight into our plural and interrelated "statuses" or multiple "identities," we may now realize that it is untenable to hold that only Chinese can understand China or, equally absurdly, that only a Western scholar can provide an outsider's "objective" view and thus provide us with true knowledge about China. The point is that no particular horizon or perspective can guarantee better knowledge, but that knowledge or scholarship as such should be assessed with a set of intellectual criteria that transcend the simple opposition between native scholarship and Sinological lore, or an insider's historical experience and an outsider's critical reflection. Understanding China and Chinese history requires integration of different views from different

perspectives, but such integration is not a simple juxtaposition of insiders' and outsiders' views; it is more of an act of interaction and mutual illumination than simply adding up native Chinese scholarship and Western Sinology. "We no longer ask whether it is the Insider or the Outsider who has monopolistic or privileged access to social knowledge," to quote Merton's (1973) words again, "instead, we begin to consider their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of seeking truth" (p. 129). In the pursuit of knowledge, being an insider or an outsider is often functionally irrelevant, and we must negotiate among our plural affiliations and multiple identities as well as those of others in order to reach a better understanding.

In the postmodern questioning of fundamental truths, however, there is a tendency to emphasize the constructedness of all categories and to negate the very presence of anything as entities objectively or really there. History is thus thought of as a textual construction, not as something as solid as a mountain. And yet, the mountain metaphor for understanding history is quite appropriate, for as E.H. Carr argues, although we should discard the positivistic notion of "objectivity," the finite determinacy of our own horizon cannot erase the existence of "the things themselves." Carr (1964) remarks, as though in conversation with Su Shi:

> It does not follow that, because a mountain appears to take on different shapes from different angles of vision, it has objectively either no shape at all or an infinity of shapes. It does not follow that, because interpretation plays a necessary part in establishing the facts of history, and because no existing interpretation is wholly objective, one interpretation is as good as another, and the facts of history are in principle not amenable to objective interpretation. (pp. 26–27)

The mountain metaphor works to the extent that historical events always happen at particular locations and geographical territories, in concrete circumstances and with materiality of their own. Nation, sovereignty, people, and their cultures all have spatial connotations. History as such, however, means more than just the concrete, material, and territorial, and therefore its richness and complexity cannot be captured entirely by the mountain metaphor. Historiography not only as record but also as interpretation involves more than what the concrete mountain metaphor may suggest, as it must have the historian's engagement and participation, thus the limitations of horizons and perspectives. In that sense, Su Shi's poem on Mount Lu is more instructive than a simple description of a mountain, for it speaks more of the difficulty of understanding than the presence of "things themselves," although the existence of the mountain is tacitly acknowledged. This difficulty, the limitation of our horizons and our finite determinacy, the difficulty of knowing something far away or up close, constitutes the challenge of China studies as it does all other humanistic disciplines. But it also encourages us to open up to different perspectives and other views, to look from various angles, to judge all with a set of intellectual criteria that transcends group allegiances and local identities, and to reach what might be a closer approximation of Mount Lu, or whatever it is that we set out to study.

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